

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 49 *Jesuit Higher Education in a Global Context*

Article 54

September 2016

Book Review: The Age of Sustainable Development, by Jeffrey Sachs

Stephens Pitts S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Pitts, Stephens S.J. (2016) "Book Review: The Age of Sustainable Development, by Jeffrey Sachs," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 49 , Article 54.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol49/iss1/54>

BOOK REVIEWS

The Age of Sustainable Development, by Jeffrey Sachs

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015 543 PAGES

Reviewed by Stephen Pitts, S.J.

Jeffrey Sachs is no stranger to large problems or grand, sweeping claims. His latest work, endorsed by none other than the U.N. Secretary General, seeks to explain the “central concept for our age,” sustainable development. The “age of economic growth” began in 1750; up until then, the entire human race lived at the subsistence level, and inequality did not exist. Thomas Malthus predicted imminent catastrophe: exponential growth in population could not keep up with linear growth in agricultural production. Malthus failed, however, to anticipate the Industrial Revolution, by which technological advances boosted industrial output and increased agricultural production. But they came at a cost that still resonates today: large-scale migration, environmental degradation, and rising inequality.

Sachs’s work reflects recent trends in economics: this year’s Nobel laureate, Angus Deaton, pioneered the use of empirical field research to address questions in development. The first few chapters trace the history of economic development while subsequent chapters summarize the latest research on particular issues: geography, education, health, agriculture, poverty, social inclusion, cities, and climate change. Both *The Great Escape* (Deaton) and *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo) treat a compa-

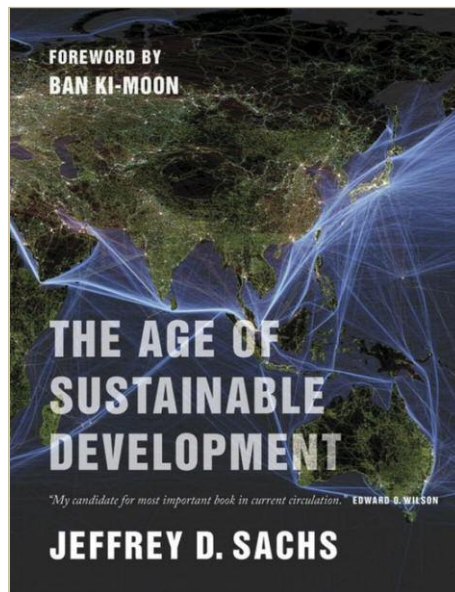


table range of topics, though Sachs alone deals with environmental issues. The work brings together material from an online course; the abundance of color pictures and lack of footnotes give it the feel of lecture notes whose enthusiastic tone aims to inspire the reader to change the world by the end of the semester.

Sachs proposes an “analytic and normative framework” to address sustainable development. On the analytic side, since World War II, a succession of models has aimed to explain the remarkable disparity between growth rates and outcomes in a variety of countries. Initially, the models looked for a key external (ex-

ogenous) factor of production that could be added to an economy. Whether from a developed country or an NGO, development aid of this sort meant infrastructure improvements. The limits of this sort of capital infusion soon emerged; factories sat idle without raw materials, schools languished without students, and roads led to nowhere. In response, recent work has acknowledged the necessity of human capital, such as education and women’s rights, and social capital, like functioning legal and financial institutions that people trust. Sachs uses complexity theory to analyze four interconnected systems: global economy, Earth systems, social interactions, and governance.

Sachs’s breadth of experience and command of examples past and present leaps out from every page. Many of the chapters end with specific policy prescriptions; in fact, the book’s final chapter describes a set of Sustainable Development Goals that parallel the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Villages in Africa provide a concrete example of the sort of multipronged intervention that he proposes: ten villages in ten different sub-Saharan African countries in which Sachs and his team implemented programs to address all eight MDG at once over the course of ten years.

The glowing account of the MDV does not mention the tremendous controversy that they have raised among Sachs’s academic peers, who contend that basic errors in his experimental design have invalidated his evidence for the effectiveness of the interventions. As in clinical trials in medicine, the increasing use of randomized controlled trials in development economics necessarily involves

ethical questions. On the one hand, can researchers withhold treatment for a disease like malaria from one village but not from an adjacent village in order to establish a control group? On the other hand, can researchers compensate participants, like those in education interventions who would otherwise not send their daughters to school?

The ethical questions that development entails certainly should not dissuade Sachs from pursuing his work. Still, it is surprising that in his 500-page book he devotes merely seven pages to ethics, a cursory survey of six different rationales for the importance of “social inclusion,” into which he subsumes most of Enlightenment political philosophy. The section ends with the laudable remark that “we therefore need to have more discussions, more public awareness, and more debates about these underlying ethical choices, because the goals of sustainable development depend on the ethical positions we adopt.” Unfortunately, the book does not deliver on its claim to offer a “normative framework.” It neither engages colleagues like Deaton who differ on the finer points of aid nor those who question the existence of any obligation of the rich toward the poor at all. Paul VI remarked: “technical expertise is necessary, but it must be accompanied by concrete signs of love.” The technocrat Sachs could learn from his words.

Stephen Pitts, S.J., is beginning his third year of theology studies at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University; throughout his Jesuit training he has had a special interest in spirituality and spiritual direction.

American Jesuits and the World How an Embattled Religious Order Made Modern Catholicism Global, by John T. McGreevy

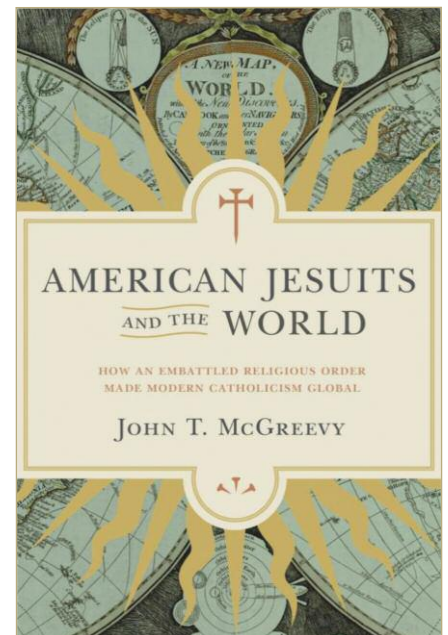
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016 315 PAGES

Reviewed by Edward W. Schmidt, S.J.

Jesuit history became a hot scholarly topic roughly two decades ago. Culture, art, dance, scholarship, science, and many other specific fields received scholarly attention and publication. Major conferences were held in 1997 and 2002. The interest has not abated.

Most of this scholarship concentrated on the Society of Jesus before its suppression by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. This was the age of the pioneers, the saints and martyrs, the missionaries, the founders. In these centuries after their founding in 1540, the Jesuits started hundreds of schools, wrote grammars for exotic languages in far-off lands, patronized major artists and architects. All the while they tended to pastoral care of the people they served with retreats, sermons, and spiritual writing. And they left copious records that modern scholars found fertile ground for new research.

The period right after the restoration of the Society in 1814 did not receive so much scholarly attention. This was a time of turmoil America and in Europe. During the period of suppression, both



the American and the French revolutions had taken place. The American Revolution didn't affect the church so much; the French Revolution certainly did. As the Jesuit order grew back in numbers, it faced far different social and cultural realities from those in which it had thrived. During the mid decades of the 19th century, many countries ejected the Jesuits as agents of a foreign power – the pope, no longer a revered spiritual